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Description

The ranching industry has a rich history in the Texas Panhandle. At the Swamp Ranch, co-owner Jay O'Brien explains that his ranch was originally founded by an Englishman who died on the RMS Titanic. Ben Thamer is a ranch hand at the Swamp Ranch and shows West Texas A&M University student Kat Radicke what it's like to care for cattle. This story is produced by NBC Learn in partnership with Pearson.

Keywords

Ranching, Texas, Cattle, Cows, Panhandle, Texas Panhandle, Ranch, Swamp Ranch, Jay O'Brien, Kat Radicke, Ben Thamer, West Texas A&M University, Agriculture, Agricultural Science, Agriscience, Calf, Calves, Bulls, Heifers, Animals, Beef, Meat, Food, Food Production, Farming, Grass, Vegetation, Food Source, Alfred Rowe, RO Ranch, Titanic, RMS Titanic, McLean, Donley County, Industry, Oil, Protein, Cowboys, Ranch Hand, Ranchers, History, Business, Lifestyle, Country, Western

Citation

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Cattle Ranching in the Texas Panhandle

KAT RADICKE (Student, West Texas A&M University): I'm Kat from West Texas A&M and I'm going to go to the Swamp Ranch to see how Jay O'Brien operates his ranch and deals with his cattle.

JAY O'BRIEN (Co-Owner, The Swamp Ranch): Hey, Kat.

I'm Jay O'Brien, this is the Swamp, which is my ranch in Donley County and basically what I do is I manage ranches throughout the Texas panhandle.

RADICKE: What is the history of this ranch and its significance?

O'BRIEN: It has a great history. The ranch was founded by a fellow named Alfred Rowe in 1878. Rowe put together a sizeable ranch and worked it himself. He had gone to agricultural school in England and then came here and did it. Rowe was a dynamic man. He didn't get married until he was 47. He brought his wife over here from England and they lived here for a few years. And then, in about 1910, she moved back to England. And he came back, and he came back in the height of luxury on the Titanic, and he went down in the Titanic.

This ranch then was sold to a man named William Lewis and he operated it until the 50s when he died and his family operated it until we bought it in the 80s.

RADICKE: How important was the ranching industry to the history of Texas?

O'BRIEN: If you look at the nineteenth century, really, especially in the panhandle, in northern Texas, there was no other industry there except for cattle. Cattle was it, and so the cattle industry was essential. But the oil industry came along and that became a parallel important industry. In the panhandle of Texas, we feed over 25 percent of the nation's beef in this area, so the cattle industry is essential to the economy of Texas.
BEN THAMER (Ranch Hand, The Swamp Ranch): My name is Ben Thamer, I'm from Amarillo, Texas. I help out out here with just general cattle operations. Today we're going to feed some cows and some baby calves.

RADICKE: Who am i feeding?

THAMER: This one right here.

It's 38-percent cotton seed cake. There's enough grass out here to sustain these cows, but what this cake does, is it just keeps them in just a little bit better shape, just gives them a little bit more protein.

RADICKE: He is checking all the cows, making sure they're all healthy, there's no problems. Kind of checking the calves, too, counting how many calves he has out here.

THAMER: Fifty and a bull is what I’ve got.

RADICKE: He had to count how many cows he had in order to know how much feed to put out here.

THAMER: Camp guys, cowboy guys, have always kept a day book, and that's just what they did every day, whether we fed this, we brand here. And so like everybody else, I just like to put mine on my iPad. In a lot of ways, ranchers, all we are are grass farmers. And these cows are our tractors. They come out here and eat this grass and they convert it into protein. And this grass keeps them healthy enough that every year they can produce a calf like all these little guys that you see running around. And that's what we actually market. That's where our paycheck comes from is by getting that calf to market weight, selling it, so eventually it becomes beef, and comes to your house or your table.

It's just good to walk through them like this, because you want them to be used to humans. We also give them a pour-on fly treatment to try to keep the bugs off them as much as possible. You get to know some of these cows, like that 429, I know her, she's friendly, she lets you pet her.

Everything we do out here, the only reason we do any of it, and the only reason our guys, like our foreman and some of our cowboys, their whole life is to take care of these cattle. They have devoted their lives, their occupational lives, to making sure that they are as content and healthy as can be.

With the exception of barbed wire fences and the fact that we're just in a settled territory, and the fact that we're able to use pickups to feed, we don't have to do everything on horseback, it's not that different than ranching was in the 1880s. Our job is to take good enough care of the grass, that the grass takes care of the cows, we're still selling the same thing they were back then. But no, it's very much not a whole lot different than back when Goodnight was here.